

Christianity and Women: A Glimpse at E. Elizabeth Vickland's *Daughter of Brahma: A Tale of the Brahmaputra Country*

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During the colonial era, Christian missionaries played a vital role to uplift the colonized people with westernization and Christianity. Most of the times the colonial rulers took help of the Christian missionaries to dominate the colonized people with the "Bible" where "guns" failed to achieve success. Assam is a small province located in the north-east India. The Britishers occupied India and all its provinces one after another. The North-eastern part was then full of numerous tribes who were violent and independent. So the Britishers decided to bring Christian missionaries to tackle with the situation in the name of civilization and religion. E. Elizabeth Vickland was a missionary who also entered the land in such purpose. During her stay, she collected various experiences which she later on jotted down in the form of fiction and non-fiction. *Daughter of Brahma: A Tale of The Brahmaputra Country* is a fiction based on a true story of a girl who took a painful journey towards Christianity. The work reflects on emancipation of woman in the colonial Assam through education and right decision in life by Nirupoma, the protagonist.

E. Elizabeth Vickland was a single lady missionary who stepped into the soil of Assam during the early 20th century. She was said to have sailed from North America to Assam in 1915. She originally hailed from New York. She worked for 'Women's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society'. She was appointed as a teacher in the largest and the oldest of the boarding school for girls located in Nowgong, Assam. She also started the Mission Girls' M.E. School at Golaghat, now known as Ridgeway Girls High School. She penned down three fictional works out of her real experiences while working with the natives of Assam. These are: *Through Judy's Eyes*, *With Christ in Assam* and *Daughter of Brahma: A Tale of the Brahmaputra Country*. Based on evangelical perspectives, her works are rich in literary articulations and factual descriptions.

World history offers a marginal position to women in different spheres of life, including religion. It was only after the Industrial Revolution and setting up colonies by the western countries, the status of women got improved. The Europeans started sending various Christian missions to non-Christian countries like China, India etc. The sole purpose was to control the colonized people by the 'Bible', if it was not possible by gun. The wives of the Christian missionaries came along with their husbands as helping hands and to look after their husbands and children. But they were never designated as missionaries. Slowly, the Mission societies started sending single or unmarried women missionaries as they showed equal skill like their male counterparts. Moreover, it was easier for the women missionaries to enter into the native households for the spread of religion and education.

Imperialism is the manifestation of power effected through domination over and suppression of the natives. The West tries to depict its best everywhere starting from religion, education, civilization, culture and so on. Finding the weak points of the natives and refining

them as civilized were merely imperial policies. 'Whiteness' as a symbol of domination and of visible power was another aspect of colonialism's manifestation in the minds on the natives.

The emancipation of Victorian women which was impossible back at 'home' was manifested in heathen lands in the form of female missionaries. The clutch of patriarchy was prominent over the First World women as well. They enjoyed a superior position only being among the native women. In words of Jane Haggis,

The recruitment of single women as lady missionary marked the beginning of a process of incorporation and professionalization of women's work (2007: 170).

Vickland presents a native Assamese girl as her protagonist in *Daughter of Brahma: A Tale of the Brahmaputra Country*. This is a fictional narrative or what Liza Das terms as "conversion Novella". The narrative offers the true life story of Nirupoma or Horumai in a small village called Tulsipur. She is a young Assamese girl who makes a painstaking journey towards evangelism. She decides to get converted into Christianity after facing many hazardous burdens and restrictions in Hinduism. Vickland portrays her as a person of strong will and determination.

Through this fictional narrative, Vickland tries to focus on Hindu restriction on women, who face restriction in choosing their path of life, being confined into the four walls. Nirupoma is a Brahmin Girl of twelve years old, also faces the hardest realities of her life after losing her parents. When her father was alive, she was the 'apple of her father's eye'. After his death, her uncle and brothers decide to send her to a rich priest's family at Rampur, as a maid. Through Nirupoma, Vickland portrays the life women led in colonial Assam. She hails from an upper caste Brahmin family which restricts movements of women even more than others. Birth of a girl child always brings misery and curse to a family. It is obvious in her conversation with Tuburi, the old woman,

"Oh, at the tank this morning the servants from Subudhi's house were saying that Subudhi was crying her eyes out because they are so unkind to her. They are angry because the new baby is a girl" (2005:7).

Vickland presents Nirupoma as a 'New Woman' who is ready to overcome all hazards, obstacles, problem and believes herself as a true 'Brahmin'. She is always a lively and flamboyant girl ready to accept any challenge. She entered into an entrapped circumstance at the priest's house. Looking after the babies and doing all household works become a daily routine for her. She loses her independence which she enjoyed back at home. The transformation of Nirupoma from a free-willed girl to a lifeless soul is the result of an unruly social system. She discovers herself in a "strange, new world- a world enclosed by four great stone walls, a world the like of which she had never dreamt" (Ibid: 33). The rude and strict rules of her master's house make her life troublesome. She shows eagerness to learn more about the Mission works which she saw on her way to the rich house. She got a wrong impression about it from the old servant but gradually learns about its enabling prospects.

Patriarchy is the driving force in the narrative. Nirupoma stands against the dominant patriarchal ideologies. Her wish to experience the Mission life leads her to elope from the priest's house. She is accepted in the Mission campus and is allowed to read and write. Her days do not last long as her master brings her back. She attempts again and again to come out of the man-made prison. She is beaten cruelly for her mischief with 'a bamboo stick, leaving great welts on her skin'. Finally, she comes out of her imprisonment to live in the Mission campus. Initially, she stays in the dormitory meant for Hindu girls. But she willingly joins the Christian dormitory thus severing her caste identity for the sake of Christianity.

Vickland tries to delineate a society which was gradually changing with the times. Nirupoma represents the empowerment of Assamese women in a bold and dignified manner. Her decision to get converted, results in separation from her near and dear ones. She breaks the monotony of being pacified as a 'passive' woman. In words of H  l  ne Cixous,

Femininity as keeping alive the other that is confided to her, that visits her, that she can love as the other. The loving to be other, another, without its necessarily going the rout of absenting what is same, herself (1997: 94-95).

In leaving her caste and joining Christianity, Nirupoma moves from her passivity to an active life. Nirupoma emerges out of her marginal space, challenging the old structures of power and embraces her freedom. The fictional narrative of Nirupoma works as means for all those deprived, in particular, male-dominated women folk to come out and experience the thrill of life under Christianity.

By choosing a native girl like Nirupoma and making her protagonist, Vickland, thus, breaks all cross-cultural binaries. Although both of them are women, there lies a sea of differences between them. While Miss Vickland represents the educated, modern women belonging to the First World; Nirupoma is a native, simple and uneducated girl of colonial Assam, the Third World. The status of women, however, has been more or less same throughout the world for centuries. Through her fictional narrative, Vickland enjoys the freedom of constructing a native woman, but from the realistic point of view. She gives emphasis on the facts like "travails of widowhood, the suffocating life of women 'under purdah', the unquestioning obedience towards their husbands" (2005: ix). Her narratives are not merely evangelical or conversion-based. They are illustrations of the ecology of Assam as well as immense knowledge of local habits, customs and expressions.

In this particular narrative, Nirupoma is shown as a free-willed girl. Her conversion to Christianity is shown as her own, without any compulsion or force. In Nirupoma, Vickland portrays the growth of an individual, not of an ordinary girl. Though the underlying theme is religion, there is much more to witness and experience in the narrative. In most occasions, the first and third world binaries collapse as Vickland and Nirupoma come to an empathic bonding. Her writing proves her concern over the emancipation of native women in every possible way. Fighting back to age-old conventions and showing a remedial path to native Assamese women were her root interests. Nirupoma's story is not only path-breaking but also full of enlightenment. Her fictional narrative is a sincere portrayal of Nirupoma, along with the life in Assam in its myriad complexity.

Evangelism worked as a tool in humanizing and controlling the colonized natives. The participation of women in missionary activities proved beneficial and successive in the heathen lands. The truth lies in the fact where women "did most of the teaching, nursing and training being carried out under the rubric of women's work" (Ang, 2003:172).

The First and Third World binaries, while at one level, separates the missionary and native women, at another level, a notion of sisterhood tends to bind them together. John McLeod in his *Beginning Postcolonialism* says,

...finding an international, cross-cultural sisterhood between 'First World' and 'Third World' women, as well as more general problems concerning who has the right to speak for whom, and the relationship between the critic and their object of analysis" (2007: 172).

Suryasikha Pathak talks about missionary women living in ‘double-bondage’. The women missionaries were different from the white ‘memsahibs’ due to their “lower-middle-class origins”. Thus, says Pathak,

This social and cultural gap compounded by imperial and nationality differences, which probably made the lives of the American Baptist women missionaries and wives more lonely (2008:9).

The reality of existence of a missionary woman confines her “in home as a woman, and alone and alienated in the colony as a foreigner, as belonging to the oppressor” (Ibid).

Elizabeth Vickland can be termed as a hegemonic writer of the colonial period, who stayed a considerable amount of years of her life in Assam. The juxtaposition of ‘place’ and ‘imaginary landscapes’ results in the assimilation of cross-cultural ideologies, traditions, customs and so on. The missionaries witness a society completely alien and opposite to theirs in Assam. They encountered a host of communities and their cultures, traditions, languages and dialects living in Assam.

Daughter of Brahma: A Tale of the Brahmaputra Country is basically evangelical in spirit. Along with that, Vickland’s portraiture of Nirupoma breaks every possible monotony of First and Third World binary. Being a woman, she undergoes through a sisterly realization and tries her best to show the right path. Coming out of Victorian domesticity and stepping into the heathen land, Vickland tries to enhance the status of women. The colonial marginalized woman is given a space and identity in her narrative. Her fictional narratives are true representation of her sympathetic attitudes towards native women. She reflects the hidden realities and tries to uplift the ‘degraded Hindu women’ with education and liberation. Nirupoma stands as her bold representation in this aspect.

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